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Reclaiming Community in Contemporary African American Fiction

Philip Page

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For my mother

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1

At the Crossroads

After cautioning her readers about the dangers of oversimplification, Margaret Atwood asserts that every country and culture has a "unifying and informing symbol": for England, it is the island; for Canada, survival; for the United States, the frontier (31). At the heart of the American dream, the concept of the frontier embodies the freedom to leave behind a personally unfulfilling or unsatisfactory place in the expectation of a better one. Moving on to a better place also creates a new time, substituting a projected new future for a no-longer-desired past. For the dream of the frontier to function, movement must be free, readily available, and perceived as advantageous. As Lawrence Levine notes, "spatial mobility" has been important "throughout American history for all segments of the population" (262), for physical mobility in American culture is the key to upward social mobility, economic success, and political expression. The frontier is the creative edge of the ideal "democratic social space" by which, according to Philip Fisher, the United States invented its national identity (72). 1

Among the many realities that render this concept an unrealized American myth, slavery is "clearly the most radical contradiction possible" (Fisher 87). Beginning with the Middle Passage, movement for Africans and then African Americans was not free but forced, was not pursuit of a dream but exile from a desired space to an horrific new one, and constituted not progressive renewal in a new time but displacement from immersion in holistic African time to alienation in linear Euro-American time. Emigration was not an optimistic quest for a new home but the almost unendurable loss of home, community, family, and iden-

tity: "Whereas Columbus conquered 'new' lands for Europeans, thus increasing their mobility and freedom and providing them with new perspectives, the African diaspora stands for the end of freedom, for the loss of perspective; . . . it meant [the slaves'] expulsion from history [and it] threatened them with social and physical annihilation" (Sollors and Diedrich 5). For slaves, America meant not the chosen rejection of an undesired past but the imposed eradication of a desired one. In America, there was no desired place either where one was or anywhere else; there was no desired frontier. The antithesis of the American dream, movement for most slaves was not a chosen quest but a coerced passage.

African-American culture was formed in the context of involuntary passages. Carl Pederson posits that "the Middle Passage is arguably the defining moment of the African-American experience" (225). Examining slave narratives, Melvin Dixon concludes, "In their long search for freedom, as in their religion and literature, slaves defined life as a pilgrimage" ("Singing" 313). Eleanor Traylor defines "the Afro-American paradigm of creation" as "a journey into experience conducted by a people who wrenched from a coherent past [and] cast refugee upon a sea of circumstance confront incoherence and give it form" (68). From the diaspora and the Middle Passage, to being sold down the river, to northward journeys to freedom, to westward and urban migrations, African Americans have been forever on the move, forced or pressured into one passage after another in the attempt to find a tolerable place in American society, to reinvent a past and a future, and to forge a cultural identity. The unifying symbol for African-American culture is therefore not the frontier but passage itself. 2

Partly because the forced passages to America and within America were so scarring, willed movement became particularly valued in African-American culture. Myths abound of heroic returns to Africa, such as the flying African(s) or Africans walking back across the ocean to Africa. Escaping slavery to the North or to Canada became a reality for some and a legend for others, and

slave narratives, documenting and embellishing such passages, became the first widespread form of written expression by African Americans. After the Civil War, the desire to move away from the sites of slavery reinvigorated this emphasis on movement, and "significant movement of Negroes began as soon as freedom made it possible" (Levine 262-63). Newly freed African Americans moved for the sake of moving, often wandering aimlessly or taking railway excursions (Levine 263). Subsequent migrations to western states, such as Oklahoma and Kansas, and the Great Migration to northern cities, like European migrations to America, were characterized by the attempt to forget the past in the hope of a better future in a more desirable place. For Lawrence Rodgers, "the history of African American life is a history of migration" (10), and for Cornel West, "the fundamental theme of New World African modernity is neither integration nor separation but rather migration and emigration" (qtd. as an epigraph in F. Griffin). 3

The idea of passage as the informing symbol of African-American literature has many implications. It suggests African Americans' continued search for place, both literal and figurative, in American society. As Houston A. Baker, Jr., contends, African Americans were consigned first to holds on slave ships, then to rural cabins, and later to urban kitchenettes and have historically not been allowed their own places but been relegated to places imposed on them (*Workings* 108). Parallel to that quest for place is the quest for an acceptable African-American past, the quest to fill in the "cultureless past" of African-American history (Early 11). The temporal devastation for African Americans was twofold: first, slaves were denied their African past, and then ex-slaves had to repress their slave pasts to become psychically whole. Because of these unresolved issues of place and time, African-American identities have historically been unsettled, constantly placed, replaced, and displaced in figurative passages from one attempted identity to another. As Ralph Ellison puts it, "Negro Americans are in desperate search for identity" (*Shadow* 297), and West identifies African Americans' "triple crisis of self-recog-

niton," in which they are simultaneously African in appearance and mores, in America without American status, and, like all Americans, alienated from Europe (31).

One response to these displacements was an emphasis on creating and maintaining a cohesive African-American culture. In three contemporary novels, these communal and cultural ties are figured by an infinite system of invisible threads connecting individuals and collectively forming the community. As Velma Henry recovers her sanity in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, she senses the connections between herself and others in her community: "She tried to look around, to take in the healer, the people circling her, the onlookers behind. But there were so many other things to look at closer at hand. The silvery tendrils that fluttered between her fingers, extending out like tiny webs of invisible thread. The strands that flowed from her to Minnie Ransom to faintly outlined witnesses by the windows" (267). Similarly, in Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow*, as Avey Johnson begins to rediscover her racial identity, she remembers people gathering for boat rides on the Hudson River: "As more people arrived to throng the area beside the river and the cool morning air warmed to the greetings and talk, she would feel what seemed to be hundreds of slender threads streaming out from her navel and from the place where her heart was to enter those around her" (190). Doot, John Edgar Wideman's alter ego in *Sent for You Yesterday*, recalls his grandmother's intricate connections to everything in the family house on Cassina Way: "I'm trying to remember the inside of her house, its shape, the furniture, the way things in it would trap the silence and spin a dusty, beaded web around her so if you peeked in from Cassina you'd see a young woman draped by layers of transparent gauze, a young woman standing up asleep, her eyes open, threads stretched from the top of her head to all the walls, the things in the room" (29-30). These images of weblike strands connecting each of these women to the people and objects around them are metaphors not only for the women's ties to their communities but also for the communities themselves. The strands are made up of

people's relationships to each other, the words they exchange, the activities they share, and their thoughts about each other. Collectively, the tangled threads of these infinitely connecting strands create an unusually powerful intersubjective web that characterizes African-American culture. 4

In novels written between 1978 and 1996, Toni Cade Bambara, Ernest Gaines, Charles Johnson, Gloria Naylor, and John Edgar Wideman create texts that explore such issues as the consequences of endless passage, quests for meaningful places, temporal discontinuities, the vagaries of identity formation, and the necessity and the difficulties of maintaining African-American cultural cohesion.⁵ In their content these novels document the spiritual and psychic disintegration that accompanies the loss of community and cultural heritage as well as the redemptive possibilities of reaffirming such ties. At the same time, through their polyvocal narrations and intricate interweavings of multiple stories, perspectives, and times, these novels enact the tangled web of African-American culture.

In *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha argues that contemporary culture is intertwined in the complexities of space, time, and identity. As opposed to the reliance on the fixity and stereotypes of colonial discourse, postcolonial discourse for Bhabha creates access to time and space outside the linear and the ordinary: "We find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion" (1). Contemporary culture is in a "middle passage" (5) of displacement and disjunction that transcends fixed identifications and "opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). This "interstitial perspective" (3) allows us "to be part of a revisionary time" in which we can simultaneously "return to the present," "renew the past," and "touch the future on its hither side" (7). In more down-to-earth terms, Albert Murray argues that the blues creates just such a discourse because it relies on improvisation, "the ultimate human (i.e., heroic) endowment,"

which best enables human beings to learn how "to be at home with [their] sometimes tolerable but never quite certain condition of *not* being at home in the world" (*Hero* 107).

For African Americans, one layer of such complexities is the surrounding contradictions of American culture. A sense of this complexity is conveyed by Jacques Derrida's whimsical yet serious remark that "America is deconstruction" (*Memories* 18). The remark is whimsical because he "risk[s]" the "hypothesis" "with a smile," yet it is serious because, as Derrida elaborates, America "is that historical space which today . . . reveals itself as being undeniably the most sensitive, receptive, or responsive space of all to the themes and effects of deconstruction." In a subsequent volume of essays titled *Deconstruction Is/in America*, Anselm Haverkamp speculates that America is deconstruction, is in deconstruction, and/or is "an exemplary place for deconstruction" because of "a *sense of difference* in America that is different from Europe" (3) and because after that original difference "America had to take on, and has taken on, differences of another dimension that are completely incommensurable with the older, European one" (5). From its mottoe *pluribus unum* to its political principle of a balance of powers, to its myths of the melting pot and multiculturalism, America is defined by differences, by the ongoing interplay among different groups, by, in Sacvan Bercovitch's terms, "dissensus," "heterogeneity and pluralism" (22, 372). Among Haverkamp's "differences of another dimension," distinct from European-Americans' original differences from Europe and African-Americans' original differences from Africa, the two differences that most defined this country are those between blacks and whites and those between South and North. African-American writers, inheritors of a placeless culture in continuous passage within American society, are ironically well placed to analyze such differences.

Denied a legitimate social, economic, and political place in American society, African Americans' figurative place is the Other, the outsider, the historically and principally unassimilated minority. Slavery depended on the enforcement of an absolute

opposition between privileged European Americans and excluded African Americans, so that American culture is built on "the complex dialectic between 'white' and 'black' cultures" (Sundquist, *To Wake* 2). Even 135 years after the abolition of slavery, that rigid binary opposition continues to define American society, as several provocative events of the 1990s remind Americans (for example, the Rodney King beating, the Clarence Thomas/Anita Hill hearing, the Million Man March, and the O. J. Simpson case). Henry Louis Gates's comment on the Simpson case applies to all four events: the differences between whites' and blacks' reactions showed whites "that this race thing was knottier than they'd ever supposed" (144).

Just as African Americans are the Other in America's racial opposition, so the South is the Other in the nation's geographical opposition. The South is the nation's most clearly recognized and recognizable region; as Peter Applebome puts it, the South is "as close to [a separate country] as this nation has ever known within its borders" (10). For most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the South associated with the "peculiar institution" of slavery, with its attempt at secession, and with a less modern economy has been not only the most separate American region but also the least privileged one and therefore the Other.

For African Americans who migrated to the urban North, the South becomes a special kind of Other, two edged and bittersweet, emotionally burdened both positively and negatively. It is depicted nostalgically as "an idyllic, rural paradise" (Allen 115) and "a spiritual homeland" (Allen 116) that cannot be forgotten, yet it is a reminder of guilt and servitude that had to be abandoned. While the North is present and tangible, the South is absent and memory. It remains in the mind because it is the site of the birth of African-American culture, the locale of one's ancestors, and therefore the source of one's collective and individual identity. It is like a ghost, haunting the consciousnesses of northern African Americans, always already both present and absent, undying yet inaccessible. As Lawrence Rodgers asserts, the key to the migrants' success was to learn what to retain from

their southern, African-American heritage and what to discard: the South "represents a usable set of experiences, cultural artifacts, and values that exemplifies an ideal and a kind of salvation even if only momentary from the pressures of the North" (38).

In contemporary African-American fiction, the South is sometimes reproduced metaphorically in a northern African-American community. The settings of Toni Morrison's novels usually cohere around such reconstructions of the South: for example, in *Sula*, the Bottom "was once a neighborhood" (3), a place that retains the character of rural, southern, African-American culture. Like the Bottom, the cafe and its mystical neighborhood in Naylor's *Bailey's Cafe* evoke the South; in David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, the Hill is the southern-like neighborhood to which John Washington returns; and in much of Wideman's fiction and nonfiction, the Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, particularly Bruston Hill, where Wideman's ancestors first settled, functions as a trace of the absent South. Typically, these echoes of the South reflect the positive values of rural African-American culture, such as the strong family ties among Pilate, Reba, and Hagar in Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and among the members of the French family in Wideman's *Sent for You Yesterday*. At the same time, these transplanted echoes of the South are far from utopian, instead reflecting realistically the harsh conditions of life in the racialized North. 6

When the South is a literal setting, its effect is usually double edged. Nel Wright's trip to New Orleans is a defining moment in her quest for selfhood during which she discovers that "I'm me. I'm not their daughter. I'm not Nel. I'm me. Me" (Morrison, *Sula* 29). But her newly discovered identity is as short lived as the trip, and she succumbs to her mother's more enduring efforts to efface Nel's personality. In Morrison's *Tar Baby*, Son attempts to go home again, but his visit to Eloe, the site both of his upbringing and of his accidental murder of his wife, leads to his separation from Jadine and his permanent exile. In Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*, Andrew Hawkins loves his parents and Minty, but to sur-

vive he must abandon them and leave the South. In Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose*, the South provides opportunities for Dessa, but those opportunities are severely restricted by the dominant slaveholding culture. In Naylor's *Mama Day*, Cocoa and George pass from the North to Willow Springs off the coast of Georgia and South Carolina, but in that rural southern setting George must die to save Cocoa.

When the South is not rural but urban, it is also double edged. In Johnson's *Middle Passage*, Rutherford Calhoun reverses the migration pattern by fleeing his and his brother's idyllic farm in Illinois for the hedonism of New Orleans. For him, the South means a life of corruption, thievery, and sensuality, but it is also where he meets his true love, Isadora. In Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, the southern city of Claybourne is the site of breakdown at all levels—personal, familial, communal, environmental, global—but at the same time the novel chronicles the eclectic forces of recovery that foreshadow a new era of potential wholeness and meaningfulness.

Southern locales, whether literal or metaphorical, are highly charged spaces in contemporary African-American novels. Metaphoric southern spaces in the North often function, in Farah Jasmine Griffin's terms, as "safe spaces" (8), havens where southern immigrants can find respite from the onslaught of northern urban life. Such havens can allow time and resources for creating a new personality, but they can also allow the immigrant to remain complacent and provincial (F. Griffin 8-9). In either case, evocation of the scenes, language, and customs of the rural South is a nostalgic attempt by the novelists, and often by their characters, to retain in the contemporary northern city crucial elements of African-American culture, formed in that rural southern past. On the one hand, this aim is impossible—one cannot go home again. But on the other hand, it is essential: only by connecting with and thereby redeeming the past can the immigrants envision a viable present and future; only by combining African-American culture and Euro-American culture can they survive. The effort to bridge the apparently unbridgeable, to be both southern and

northern, rural and urban, reenacts the dual perspective of insider/outsider that epitomizes African-American culture. 7

Just as a secure place in American culture has been problematic for African Americans, they have also been excluded from time: first, their African history was repudiated, then their slave past could not be acknowledged, and throughout American history they have been denied full participation in the American dream of a utopian democracy. As Bonnie Barthold puts it, African Americans have been "cut off and dispossessed from both the mythic cycle of Africa and the linear flow of Western time" (16) and therefore are vulnerable to the "possibility of temporal dispossession" (17) and the "chaos of time" (31). Andrew Hawkins, the protagonist of *Oxherding Tale*, expresses this sense of dispossession: "the past is threatening [for African Americans] because there is no history worth mentioning" (132). There is no history or rather no acknowledged history and no felt sense of meaningful history because the African diaspora meant not only "the end of freedom" and "the loss of perspective" but "for the slaves it meant their expulsion from history" and "the threat of social and physical annihilation" (Sollors and Diedrich 5).⁸

Given this historical exclusion, part of the cultural work of African-American literature is to bridge such temporal gaps. Kimberly Bentson contends that "all of Afro-American literature may be seen as one vast genealogical poem that attempts to restore continuity to the ruptures or discontinuities imposed by the history of black presence in America" (152). Accordingly, characters in contemporary African-American novels often look for ways to rediscover their cultural past, to reconnect with history. These quests may involve a physical return to Africa, as in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy*; a depiction of the Middle Passage as in Johnson's *Middle Passage*; an account of slave life and escape to freedom, as in Morrison's *Beloved*, Williams' *Dessa Rose*, and Johnson's *Oxherding Tale*; a representation of a mythical, free African-American community as in *Mama Day*; or a historical search into the records of the slave past, as in David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident*. Most often,

the quest entails characters' memories of the past, retold through passed-down family and communal stories, shared between two or more characters or envisioned inwardly by single characters. For example, Morrison's *Beloved* and *Jazz* are built around the characters' painful but necessary reworkings of the traumas of the past, and much of Wideman's fiction focuses on re-creations of his personal, familial, and communal past in Homewood or on evocations of eighteenth-century Philadelphia.

Since the South conflates the spatial and temporal origins of African-American culture, it is often evoked through memory. Sweet Home in *Beloved* and Vesper County in *Jazz* are presented only as the characters' remembered pasts. In both cases, the South is particularly double edged and most noticeably Other. Sethe, Paul D, Joe, and Violet must remember the southern past or its repression will kill them, but the remembering may kill them as well, so they must remember it carefully, must retell and rehear it gradually, must circle back to it gingerly. In *The Chaneysville Incident*, John Washington, a "modern subject who needs a temporary unification between the past and the future in the present" (Hogue 449), can only resolve his present conflicts by immersing himself through meticulous historical research and his own imagination in his ancestors' past. In *Bailey's Cafe* the series of stories documenting the characters' pasts must be remembered and articulated before the community can unite in the ritual celebration of George's birth. Presence is only meaningful when absence is acknowledged; presence and absence must not be considered mutually exclusive but complementary, interrelated, inseparable. To survive, the characters must work through the paradoxical process of remembering to forget. The South Sweet Home, Vesper County, the graveyard in *The Chaneysville Incident*, the delta dust that Eve can never wash off in *Bailey's Cafe* is what they must never forget yet must forget, what is absent yet present, what is past yet never past. It is the elusive trace of a previous self that cannot be erased but must be transcended in ongoing re-creations of the self.

Ernest Gaines's *A Gathering of Old Men* combines a physical

southern setting a former plantation in Louisiana and memories of the southern past. The present African-American community is spiritually bankrupt, reduced to children and spiritually weakened old people, overgrown with weeds, and under the economic and social domination of Cajun and Anglo whites. But, prior to making their stand against legal and illegal white power, the old men assemble at the African-American graveyard and regain their vitality through memories of their ancestors. This implicit absorption of the southern past becomes explicit when the men and women chronicle their deeper reasons for finally standing up to the white-controlled system. In the novel's most profound scene, a series of characters testifies to past racial injustices and to their failures and/or inability to oppose such injustices. Now, at last, with nothing more to lose, the old people stand up to reclaim the past and thereby regain their dignity and their identities. Whereas in *Beloved* and *Jazz* the past must be remembered so that the characters can move beyond it, here the past must be remembered so that the characters can redeem it. That past is horrifying and shameful in terms of racial injustice yet simultaneously rich in terms of natural beauty, communal bonds, and meaningful employment. 9

The South symbolizes that past life's brutality but also its meaningfulness in contemporary African-American fiction. The South is the cultural memory and identity that is no longer physically present but is indelibly marked within. As Johnny Paul, one of Gaines's old men, avers to Sheriff Mapes, "You don't see what we don't see" (89). The white man, Mapes, cannot see in his mind's eye cannot remember the beauty, the communal brotherhood, and the individual integrity that the black people can and always will envision. By seeing what the whites cannot see, the blacks do not allow their southern past to be plowed under, they communally repossess their cultural heritage, they bridge the apparent gap between present and past, they refuse to be marginalized as Other, and thereby they revalidate their identities. Like all African Americans, they are, in Cornel West's terms, the Americans who cannot forget, "who could not not

know" (qtd. in O'Meally and Fabre 3). As they insist on the relevance of the past, the men enact their redemption of it. Through their actions and words, they attempt to atone for their past failures, and, by rewriting the past, they create a new present on which to build a newly envisioned future.

The South as site of the origins of African-American culture is often symbolized by ancestor characters. As Morrison claims, ancestors are "sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective," and "the presence or absence of that figure determine[s] the success or the happiness of the character" ("Rootedness" 343). Karla F. C. Holloway sees the idea of ancestry as fundamental in African-American women's fiction, for the ancestor is "a metaphorical construction intersecting these texts" (*Moorings* 115). Farah Griffin places the northern migrant character between the influences of the benevolent ancestor and the confounding stranger, showing, for example, that Ellison's invisible man does not adapt well to the northern city as long as he is seduced by strangers (13031) but that Morrison's Milkman Dead does succeed because of his tutelage by such ancestors as Pilate, Reverend Cooper, and Circe (172-73).

Contemporary African-American fiction abounds with ancestor figures: some are flesh-and-blood older relatives or friends who guide protagonists toward remembering and revaluing their cultural heritage, such as Thérèse in *Tar Baby*, Aunt Cuney in *Praisesong for the Widow*, Miss Emma and Tante Lou in Gaines's *A Lesson before Dying*, and Mama Day and Abigail in *Mama Day*; some are legendary figures in the distant past, like Jake Solomon, who flew back to Africa, or the Ibos, who walked back, in *Praisesong*; and some are the ur-ancestors who established families and communities, such as Sapphira Wade in *Mama Day* and Sybela Owens in Wideman's Homewood trilogy.

Johnson's *Middle Passage* introduces the most ancient of ancestors. Aboard a slave ship, the freedman Rutherford Calhoun encounters the fictional Allmuseri tribe, who are alleged to be an "old people . . . who existed when the planetthe galaxy, even-